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ABSTRACT

This study explored the effectiveness with which Catholic secondary schools served students from low-income families, with particular emphasis on the usefulness and results of tracking. Teams of researchers spent one full week in each of three Catholic secondary schools on the east coast gathering data through interviews with students, teachers, administrators, and parents; observing classrooms; and examining materials submitted by school administrators. The portrait of the tracking programs at the Catholic schools was not too different from that observed in public schools. Catholic schools had as many subject areas and ability grouped courses and were just as constrained in placement decisions. Catholic schools did not seem to avoid the racial differentiation endemic in tracking. Where the organizational differences emerged was in the curriculum and quality of instruction, and a challenging learning environment was prevalent in all levels of the Catholic school tracking programs. A two-page list of references and 14 tables summarizing research data conclude the document. (CB)

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TRACKING:
CAN IT BENEFIT LOW ACHIEVING STUDENTS?

by

Linda R. Valli

The Catholic University of America

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INTRODUCTION

Tracking, or inter-class ability grouping, continues to be a traditional means of organizing the high school curriculum though it has been the constant target of criticisms from liberal and radical sociologists, economists, and educationists. At the school level, these critiques focus on inequalities of educational opportunities, limitations on future educational and occupational choices, selection on non-meritocratic bases, lowering student self esteem, and increasing the drop out rate (Oakes 1985; Rosenbaum 1976). At a social level, these school effects are described as legitimating social inequality and recreating a class society (Bowles and Gintis 1976; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Karabel 1972).

Although tracking might be regarded as an overanalyzed issue, it continues to be significant since academics and practitioners differ so markedly in their analyses, with practitioners generally extolling its educational benefits (Oakes 1985). Are practitioners concerned only about the ease of instruction, unmindful of the negative consequences of tracking? Or do they have genuine knowledge about appropriate learning environments? Data analysis from three schools identified as having a special commitment to low income and low achieving students, shed some additional

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light on student experiences and on the consequences of tracking.

Though tracking is commonly thought of as the public labeling of students who are moved in homogeneous groups through different types and levels of courses, its structure can be quite diverse and complex. As Oakes (1985: 3) defines it, "tracking is the process whereby students are divided into categories so that they can be assigned in groups to various kinds of classes." Yet, as her analysis indicates, the assignment can be on an individual basis. Moreover, "kinds of classes" can refer to qualitatively different types of courses (academic, general, vocational) or to courses with different degrees of difficulty. And sometimes courses are given a track number, not because they are reserved for students in that track, but because the number of quality points a student can receive for a given grade (which determines rank in class) is dependent on the difficulty level of the course.

My interest in tracking was re-kindled during a field study of Catholic high schools. Acquaintance with the labeling and stratification literature (Page 1984 ; Rist 1970) made me highly skeptical of the capacity of a tracking system to serve any students except the most privileged. My own research in a basically untracked comprehensive public high school reinforced my conviction that only such an environment could provide maximum opportunity for students

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(Valli, 1986). I was totally unprepared for students' invariably positive evaluations of their schools' tracking systems.

I first attributed St. Catherine's students' comments to the hidden, individualized nature of the school's sorting process. Classes, not students, were given level numbers; the word track was never used. I presumed that the private way in which course selection occurred muted students' criticisms and possibly tracking's negative consequences. Students, I thought, were simply not conscious of its detrimental effects.

But the next research site immediately destroyed that theory. At Central Catholic a student's track was as public as his name. Every student could immediately give his track number, with Track 3 students specifying levels a, b, c, or d as well. Yet student interviews elicited the same positive comments about ability grouping heard at St. Catherine. Having explored and rejected the possibilities that students were giving us a sanitized view of their school experience or that only certain types of students were being sent for interviews, I was forced to begin to reassess my prior conclusion that tracking was nothing more than an insidious sorting mechanism for a class society. This paper is a product of that re-consideration.

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METHODOLOGY

The data were gathered during a field study component of a national survey study of Catholic schools (Bauch et al., 1985a).[1] The purpose of that national study was twofold: to create a national portrait of Catholic secondary schools, and to assess how effectively Catholic secondary schools serve students from low-income families. Effectiveness in serving low-income students was defined as degree of teacher commitment. Schools where teachers rated themselves high on that variable served as a pool from which the schools discussed in this paper were chosen for a descriptive analysis.[2]

Teams of researchers spent one full week in each of the three schools. Two of us gathered data at St. Catherine, five at Central Catholic, and six at Murphy. Though a week is a short amount of time for field work, the research team's preparation made our time use highly efficient. Weekly meetings during the months prior to the field studies enabled us to formulate focused interview protocols, develop a student and parent questionnaire, and develop a tight schedule for each day so that the maximum number of observations and interviews could take place.

In addition, administrators of the schools sent relevant documents and materials for the research teams to analyze prior to the site visits. At St. Catherine, the

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researchers stayed at the school convent, giving us access to some administrators and teachers during evening hours. Some evening time was also spent with faculty and parents at Central Catholic.

To ensure that a broad range of students would be interviewed principals were asked to form discussion groups composed of high, medium, and low-performing students from each class. At the end of each group interview, a sub-sample of students to be individually interviewed was randomly chosen. Faculty to be interviewed were similarly selected.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The schools were located in three different metropolitan areas on the east coast. Central Catholic and St. Catherine were considerably larger than Murphy, with a slightly higher student/teacher ratio. Each school had a sizable non-Catholic and minority population: Murphy's student body was predominantly black, St. Catherine's predominantly Hispanic. St. Catherine is an all girls school; Murphy and Central Catholic are all boys schools. Central has a geographically bounded catchment area determined by the archdiocese, while St. Catherine and Murphy enroll students from their entire metropolitan areas.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

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Graduation requirements in the four main academic areas of English, social studies, science, and mathematics were above the national average, as were the schools' college-going rates. This is a particularly revealing statistic for Murphy and St. Catherine. These two schools had minority enrollments of 95% and 90% respectively and approximately 35% of St. Catherine's families were welfare recipients. (Seventy-eight percent of the student body was on the reduced or free breakfast and lunch program.) Both schools had reputations in their area of accepting students whom other area Catholic schools rejected on the basis of low academic potential. If tracking is conceptualized on a school system level, both schools would be the lowest track (in terms of student ability, not school quality) in their archdiocese. In fact, Murphy's school system mandate was to serve low achieving students.

ORGANIZATIONAL FEATURES

Oakes' (1985) five dimensions of tracking systems provide a useful way of comparing the track structures of Central Catholic, St. Catherine, and Murphy to a national sample. These dimensions are extent, pervasiveness, flexibility, mobility, and locus of control. As the following comparison indicates, in terms of these five structural dimensions, there are no marked differences between the three Catholic schools and the thirteen senior

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high schools in the national sample. With only minor exceptions, the Catholic school dimensions fell well within the ranges of the thirteen schools and followed the dominant pattern within each dimension.

Extent of Tracking

The extent of tracking gives the proportion of classes which were ability grouped at a school. This measure was estimated by administrators and counselors for the thirteen senior high schools in the national sample and ranged from one third to virtually every class. A similar range was found in the three Catholic high schools. By using the schools' course catalogues as the data base and excluding physical education classes, I estimated that only about 17% of Murphy's and 47% of St. Catherines classes were tracked. These schools were in marked contrast to Central Catholic which generally had three or four tracks for every class. As the course catalogue stated

> All courses except Physical Education are tracked; that is, each course has a degree of difficulty designated by a track number ranging from one to four.

However, this did not always mean that only students officially designated to that track could take the course. Typing I, required for all students, was labeled Track 3, Art I was Track 3, and Art IV was Track I. In these

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instances tracking did not serve to ability group students, but to designate course "degree of difficulty" so that quality points, which determined class rank, could be assigned.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

When only the four major academic areas (English, math, science, and social studies) are used to determine the extent of tracking, the proportions increase. All of Central's classes are then ability grouped, as are 97% of St. Catherine's and 50% of Murphy's. St. Catherine's sole exception was an elective, Introduction to BASIC, listed as a math class. At Murphy, all the math classes, most science classes, only 11th and 12th grade English, and only one social studies class (U.S. History) were tracked.

Pervasiveness of Tracking

Defined as "the number of subject areas at the school that were tracked" (Oakes 1985: 48), the national sample found between four and eight subjects tracked in every school. Again the Catholic schools followed the same pattern. At Murphy, one department (mathematics) was totally tracked and three (science, English and social studies) were partially tracked.

TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

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Tracking was more pervasive at St. Catherine: four areas (math, science, English and social studies) were totally tracked and foreign languages was partially tracked. Central had the most pervasive tracking system, with students ability grouped in every religion and foreign language class as well as the four major academic areas. They were also ability grouped in some business classes. The fine arts at all three schools, though given track designations, were heterogeneously grouped.

Flexibility

The flexibility of the tracking system refers to the school policy of determining placement. Criteria could be used to give students one track designation across all subjects. Or they could be used on a course by course basis whereby a student's track would vary across disciplines. In the national sample, more than half the schools used the flexible approach.

TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

At Central, each student is designated to a track level and takes all required courses at that level. Neither St. Catherine nor Murphy assigns students to tracks, leaving ability grouping to be more flexibly determined on a subject by subject basis.

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Mobility

This dimension gives an indication of student movement among track levels. No information is available for over half the schools in the national sample (Oakes 1985, p. 51), but for the six others, two estimates were less than 10% mobility, one between 10-20%, and three between 21-30%. Two of the highest mobility schools reported mostly downward movement, with students reassigned to lower tracks. The vice principal at Murphy noted a similar trend to lower class placements.

TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE

At Central, approximately 5% of Track 2 students move into Track 1, while three times as many Track 1's move down a track. However, at the end of the year, half the Track 4 freshmen are moved up to Track 3. The school reported no reassignments to the lowest track. The mobility at St. Catherine was impossible to estimate because of the individualized approach to scheduling (i.e. a student could move up in one course and down in another during the same semester).

Locus of Control

This dimension is an indicator of which groups have the power to determine curriculum placement. At ten of the schools in the national sample teachers/counselors are the

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decision makers. At only three schools do students have input--but not necessarily the final say. The Catholic schools follow the same pattern. Murphy and Central teachers/counselors make tracking decisions on the basis of students' grades.

TABLE 7 ABOUT HERE

At Central, the criteria for placement are explicit. If a student averages 88% or better he is eligible to move up a track. If his average is 80% or below he can be moved down. What the official criteria do not reveal, however, is that students sometimes deliberately keep their averages low so they will not be moved up a track--where they know they would be forced to work harder. Students, in other words, have figured out how to have an "unofficial" voice in placement decisions.

Tracking critiques do not generally take this phenomenon into account. They tend to focus on a challenging curriculum being withheld from students rather than students deliberately keeping themselves from that curriculum. As Table 7 indicates, this does not seem to be the case for these three Catholic schools. A high percentage of students, irrespective of track placement, agree that they are forced to work hard. Fewer students, particularly in the case of general track students at Central Catholic, say they work as hard as they can. A logical inference is that

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these students deliberately hold back on effort, because they do not want to be moved up a track where they will be forced to work even harder.

TABLE 8 ABOUT HERE

Only at St. Catherine are students systematically part of the placement conference. In fact, with the exception of freshmen, they initially suggest their course schedule although, as the student handbook states, the principal has the final voice:

> A course selection paper is distributed to students every year. Requests for courses are approved by parents and teachers. After course selection sheets have been submitted, signed by the parents and approved by the teachers, there may be no change by the students....The administrator of the school has the final decision on all course selections.

Curriculum Differentiation

These five dimensions of tracking (extent, pervasiveness, flexibility, mobility and locus of control) give only a general image of the way students are grouped for instructional purposes. Looking at tracking from two other perspectives--curriculum differentiation and instructional quality--provides a closer view of the impact

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of ability grouping in these schools. These categories reveal the type and availability of school knowledge to students in different tracks.

Tables 3, 4, 9, and 10 give some indication of the extent of curriculum differentiation at these three Catholic schools. Central Catholic obviously has the most differentiated curriculum. All courses, across all disciplines are clearly identified by a track number. Students are grouped by ability in religion (four tracks) and in foreign languages (three tracks) the same as they are in the four main academic areas.

TABLE 9 ABOUT HERE

Without the additional information from Tables 9 and 10, however, the schools appear to be more pervasively tracked than they really are. When the extent of tracking in a school is defined by the more limiting definition of "courses taught at different levels of difficulty" the degree of tracking in the schools (Table 9) decreases substantially. The measures in Table 3 are so much higher because different track numbers are assigned courses within a department to designate level of difficulty--even when no easier or harder version of that course is offered.

TABLE 10 ABOUT HERE

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As is evident from Table 10, most classes at St. Catherine and Murphy are at the standard or general level. The column for Central Catholic is somewhat deceiving. Although only 26% of its courses are offered at the Track III level (standard), Track 3 has four ability grouped sections within it. Most of the student body is Track III. Tracks I and II have only one section each.

This classification system might still be deceiving, however, given the common understanding of the "standard" or "general" track being equivalent to non-college track. This was definitely <u>not</u> the case at these schools where the contrast is more appropriately advanced or honors students. As can be seen from Table 1, each school had a high college-going rate. Many college-bound students at all three schools took most, if not all, of their classes at the general (2) level.

Another factor relevant to curriculum differentiation, implied by Table 10 is that none of these schools had a vocational track. Four of the five track levels identified in Table 10 represent a liberal arts curriculum which offer students a basic college foundation. Only the level 1 basic skill courses depart from that orientation. At Murphy and St. Catherine only remedial reading and math classes and a few electives were level 1. These remedial classes did not <u>replace</u> English and math requirements, but were supplemental to them. One student at St. Catherine stated that although

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she was in the 9th grade reading class, she was in Honors English, math, history and science.

At Central Catholic, half the Track 4 students had moved to Track 3 by their junior year and the track was totally eliminated for seniors. In other words, even though five distinct levels (and eight in the case of Central Catholic) could be identified, the range of curriculum differentiation was probably far smaller than it is at the typical comprehensive public school.

Tracking did create some curriculum differences, however. At Central Catholic, Track 4 freshmen took reading instead of science and no foreign language. At all the schools courses like physics and pre-calculus were open only to advanced seniors. Ninth and tenth graders who seemed to have difficulty with math (as indicated by standardized test scores) were assigned to general math classes which emphasized binary operations, relations among fractions, decimals and percentages, the metric system, and practical applications instead of algebra and geometry. Electives also provided some diversity in programs of study.

Track distinctions did, at times, create difficulties for students who moved up one or more levels. The case of Anthony, from Central Catholic, is a case in point. During grade school Anthony "clowned around" a lot, getting grades in the high 70's and low 80's. He said he did not take his high school entrance exam seriously, that he was too young

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to consider college implications. When informed he had been placed in Track 4, Anthony was totally shocked. As a freshman he received 1st honors (while doing no homework) and was moved to Track 3 his sophomore year where he again received 1st honors.

The year of our interview Anthony was a Track 2 junior, working hard at his studies, taking six classes, and still receiving 2nd honors. But because of his initial lower track placement, Anthony had to start a foreign language and take Algebra II his junior year. This made it impossible for him to take higher level electives like accounting, engineering drawing, or a computer class which he thought might give him a focus for college. Though he was not complaining, Anthony clearly realized that access to higher level knowledge had been unnecessarily denied him.

As should now be apparent, the curriculum within each Catholic school differed not as much by type as by degree of difficulty. Class observations corroborated student and faculty impressions that the main curriculum difference was that lower level tracks covered content more slowly, upper tracks covered it in more depth. In lower tracks, the teacher was apt to go over the day's assignment more carefully and thoroughly, spending time on review, explaining a concept in different ways, with more examples to insure students' understanding. As one student

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succinctly captured the difference: advanced classes "move more quickly."

The type of tests students are given at the end of a semester is one indication of what they have been expected to learn in that class. Comparing exams in the same course at different track levels is one measure of curriculum differentiation. I was able to collect eight such exam groups from Central Catholic: two sets in religion, three in science, and three in mathematics. The different track levels were most often taught by the same teacher.

In two of the religion courses the exams given to Tracks 1 and 2 were identical. In the third course, exams given to Tracks 2 and 3 were basically the same. All the exams had essay questions and a range of objective type questions: multiple choice, true/false, short answer, matching, fill-in-the-blank. Much of the content was also the same. Even in the comparison of Track 1 and 4 exams, similarities were found. Objective questions covered many of the same concepts and terms (adolescence, covenant, epistle, evangelists, major world religions, etc.). Track 1 had more concepts and questions than Track 4 and more difficult essay questions. Much of the Track 4 exam asked personal growth-type queries (e.g. How can someone become a better person? What traits do you admire? How have your images of God changed?) which would be virtually impossible to answer wrong. Track 1 essay questions were much more

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cognitively oriented: 'explain how culture affects moral guidelines, compare/contrast faith and religion, explain what the Scriptural depiction of Pentecost says about the new relationship between God and his people).

As with religion, some overlap existed in the math exams for different tracks. In Algebra I, Track 1 students had to answer 67 questions in the same amount of time Track 2 students answered 52 questions. Twenty-four of the questions were the same. In Geometry, Track 1 and 2 exams both had 70 mostly multiple choice questions. An evaluation of the exams by a math educator (Ph.D.) indicated that only some of the Track 1 questions were slightly more difficult. The biggest difference was between Track 1 and 3 in Algebra II. Though the Track 1 exam only had 20 questions (to Track 3's 30), they were substantively more difficult. Track 3 students were given twenty-one multiple choice problems and five equations to solve, and were asked to state the steps in solving an equation. Track 1 students had no multiple choice questions. Throughout the exam they were asked to solve equations, show proof, explain procedures, graph, simplify, and evaluate problems. Their exam questions also included some trigonometry.

In the sciences, exams were almost exclusively multiple choice. In some cases higher tracks were given more questions, in others, lower tracks had more questions. An analysis of the exams by a group of high school science

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teachers again indicates overlap in content and difficulty in some of the questions.

The other main curriculum distinction between tracks was the number of classes required. Here, though Murphy and St. Catherine may have required or encouraged higher level students to take more classes than lower level students, only at Central Catholic was there an explicit policy difference. Ninth and tenth graders in Tracks 3 and 4 took six classes instead of seven; Track 3 juniors and senior took five classes instead of six. The lower tracks' extra class period was replaced with a supervised study to ensure, as the assistant principal said, "that their work is getting done." The logic is apparently that lower achieving students should have less new content to be exposed to and more time to review and practice the content they had been taught.

Instructional Quality

Data collected from classroom observations, a student questionnaire, and private interviews indicate that the instructional quality at these three schools was fairly high and that while there were some problems, instructional quality did not significantly decline in the lower tracks. Formal observations of a total of thirty-six classes were made at the three schools. Observed classes ranged from senior physics to ninth-grade remedial reading. Independent

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measures of on-task behavior, student engagement in learning levels, and use of class time combine to portray schools where very little in-class time was spent in non-instructional ways.

Observers recorded that in approximately half the classes the vast majority of students were highly engaged in learning activities throughout classtime. In only one class was engagement level low. That was a Spanish I class at Murphy where the teacher spent 50% of classtime on discipline, 20% on classroom routines, and only 30% on instruction. The two remedial reading classes at Murphy also had a low percentage of instructional time reported (20% and 70%). No other class did. Other time use measures were all 85% or higher with many courses at both Central Catholic and St. Catherine receiving close to 100% instructional time use--irrespective of track.

Lectures, discussions, recitations, practice, and seatwork were modes of teaching across track levels. Lecturing was always in combination with another mode of teaching and was found in remedial reading classes as well as Track 1 physics and social studies. Only a small percentage of classes was devoid of content development and two of those were Murphy's Spanish and reading classes referred to in the previous paragraph.

Students, particularly those at Central Catholic where tracking was both the most prevalent and the most explicit,

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consistently reported that everyone had to spend about the same amount of time on homework. Students explained that though their homework was not as hard, lower track students had just as much work because it took them longer to do it. This information was not, however, corroborated by the questionnaire information we received.

TABLE 11 ABOUT HERE

General Track students invariably reported spending less time on homework than did academic track students. One possible explanation for the discrepancy is that since General Track students take fewer courses, they have more study time during school hours to work on assignments. They might not be counting this worktime as "homework;" it is work they complete during school.

Though one might wonder about students saying they work as hard as they can when they apparently do so little homework, the urban context of their lives needs to be considered. As one teacher from St. Catherine's said

> ...I don't really get into making a point of finding out what their home environment is like because I'm afraid that I'm going to feel so sorry for them that I'm not going to put the academic demands on them that I would for someone else.

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The context of students' out-of-school lives in all probability made lengthy, concentrated homework time an impossibility.

At Murphy High School, students noted how committed teachers were to helping them learn. They mentioned teachers' availability for tutoring or individual help, and the benefit of small class sizes. Teachers noted the importance of "starting where the students are and going from there," of re-teaching material in different ways, and of making sure everyone understood the material before moving on. In some of the more basic classes in particular, teachers kept students accountable by giving quizzes almost daily. They also provided students with positive feedback on their papers, saying "negative comments don't work with our kids."

STUDENT ATTITUDES

There is considerable concern in the literature about the self-esteem effects of homogeneous grouping on the lowest achieving students. But the "low achievers" we interviewed spoke favorably about being in lower tracks and even remedial classes. A St. Catherine 9th grader was grateful for the opportunity to take remedial courses which would help her get better by giving her "a little bit of extra help." A senior concurred: "I like the fact that they place you, how can I say, with people on your own level

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so that you wouldn't feel bad that people would be better than you." Students did not think their five level curriculum caused divisions in the student body or stigmatized lower achieving students: "We don't put on any airs. You do your work."

All the students in the senior group at Central Catholic similarly agreed that their tracking system had worked well for them. There was no indication that Track 3 students felt deprived of a quality education or unfavorably labeled. As previously mentioned, students said they sometimes deliberately tried to keep their grades low to get placed down a track where they wouldn't have to work so hard. But the faculty, who knew their students quite well, were alert to these efforts. Faculty often told students they were being lazy and would have to suffer with their higher track placement.

Those Central Catholic students who were in Track 3 said they liked the idea of homogeneous grouping because they were in with students at their own level. They thought this made it possible for them to do better, to understand them material more quickly, whereas they might be failing in a higher track. One third track sophomore said the system gave him incentive to try to get up to the second and then the first track.

TABLE 12 ABOUT HERE

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Questions about instructional quality on the student survey indicated no significant difference by track. In fact, in the case of Central Catholic a higher percentage of general track students rated class discussions and lectures interesting and teaching qualities better than their academic counterparts did. Similarly, a higher percentage of Murphy's general track rated teachers as helpful. In this sample, instructional quality appears to differ more by school than by track.

Measures of school efficacy and climate again reveal no significant differences by track. Students who identify themselves as general or academic track rate their schools equally high. These three schools are apparently very successful in helping students believe in their ability and in creating a pleasant learning atmosphere for all students.

TABLE 13 ABOUT HERE

In contrast to these homogeneously grouped classes, mixed ability classes were described as unfair. Students said such classes would inevitably make it harder for students to understand and that they might fail. They favorably contrasted their tracked high school classes to their mixed ability elementary school classes where they often felt left behind with few resources to catch up. In grade school, Track 3 students never had a chance to get A's. At Central Catholic they did. As one sophomore said,

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"In grade school...the only people that learn are those that are quick."

This preference of low-achieving students for homogeneously grouped classes supports Berliner's (1985) and others' contention that young people, especially lower social class children, need to be in academic settings which enable them to experience success. High success rate is an essential component of learning:

> ...the necessity for high success experiences for young students, where curriculum has been carefully matched to the student so that the student can succeed at it, seems to be the precursor for the development of a positive academic self-concept (Berliner 1985: 9).

From years of commitment to low-achieving students, the teachers at Murphy, St. Catherine, and Central Catholic were highly aware of this necessity. The teachers consciously strove to develop positive self-images. They regarded this deficiency rather than lack of academic ability to be the critical factor in students' learning problems. Students knew their teachers believed they could learn:

> Murphy gives you an 'attitude' that helps you do well in school. If I had had the attitude for eight years at my elementary school that I do here it would have been different. My test scores would have been a little higher and I would have learned

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> more. I think they try to give one self-confidence, that is in getting the student to believe that he can be successful if he prepares himself correctly (Bauch et al., 1985b: 5).

Nowhere did we hear teachers say, "I don't know how to reach this type of student." Teachers were perceived as caring, even as friends. Poor academic performance was not held against students as long as they were trying. As one student said, "They really do care, you kow. It's not that you do well, it's that you try....They won't fail a student if he's trying as hard as he can. That's not the job here to fail kids. They want them to learn."

Only mythical thinking can picture low-achieving students in non-ability grouped heterogeneous classrooms receiving the same instruction as their higher achieving peers. We know from years of research on teacher expectations that students for whom teachers have low expectations are given less time to answer teachers' questions, receive less praise for successful performance, have their work interrupted more, are smiled at less, and are seated further away from teachers (Berliner 1985; Proctor 1984).

SOCIAL CLASS AND RACIAL DISTRIBUTION

Since academic achievement is correlated with race and income level, an unintended consequence of tracking is that

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a disproportionately high number of minority and low income students are often found at the lower levels. Tracking systems, in other words, create intra-school racial and social class segregation. Because Central Catholic was the only school with both a racially diverse student body (63% white, 34% black) and an explicit track system, it was the only school for which track composition measures could be determined.

TABLE 14 ABOUT HERE

As Table 14 indicates, the higher tracks have proportionately fewer low income and minority students, with the minority composition of the two highest tracks only 18%. On average, the distribution is more skewed on race than income. In a Track 1 or 2 class of 33 students only six students would be black. Since almost two-thirds of Central Catholic's student body is white, and since most classes are levels 3 and 4, few courses have mostly black students. Classroom observations do not give the impression that minority students are clustered at the lower levels. Only a close examination of enrollment figures reveals that information.

What must be born in mind in interpreting these figures, however, is that students' social class was more homogeneous than the typical comprehensive public school, while its racial composition was more heterogeneous. If these

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students had gone to their local public schools they would have been in predominantly single race environments. The black students at Central Catholic would have attended one public school, the white students another. So even though the tracking system did create a certain degree of segregation, it was much lower than what would have been experienced in the public system. Central Catholic was widely acknowledged as a stable, integrating force in a ghetto-like neighborhood.

Moreover, the lessening of racial prejudice was an explicit goal of the school and many thought the most important lesson learned there. Inter-racial cohesiveness developed as students progressed toward their senior year:

> After four years a lot of racial prejudice breaks down....There's a lot of fear when most lads show up on the first day....Freshmen tend to separate themselves; two separate groups in the auditorium and everything else. Once they get here and start working together a lot of that changes. There's an unbelievable difference. I'm not saying it's perfect. There are still racial slurs, but most kids, by the time they leave, have people of other races for friends...At least they learn to tolerate.

In the words of one of the juniors, "You don't have people walking around trying to act tough, person trying to act

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bad, you know. Everyone likes everybody. No threats, no racial anything."

Ninety-four percent of student responses on the survey agreed that students of different races should go to school together; 98% believed that students of all races and income levels received an equally good education at Central Catholic. Similar responses were given by students at Murphy and St. Catherine.

DISCUSSION

The portrait of the five tracking dimensions of these three Catholic schools is not too different from that found in a national sample of public schools. The Catholic schools had just as many subject areas and courses ability-grouped. Catholic school students were just as constrained in placement decisions and in their chances for higher track mobility. Nor do Catholic schools seem to avoid the racial differentiation endemic in tracking. Where the organizational differences emerge is in the curriculum and instructional quality. Because students in the lower tracks in the Catholic schools received about the same type and quality of instruction as their higher track counterparts, the negative consequences were mitigated.3

Because teachers were committed to improving life's possibilities for their students, a challenging learning environment was prevalent at all track levels. Teachers,

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students kept stressing, expected them to do their personal best. A St. Catherine student commented that teachers wouldn't just let them sit there "and don't do anything. They know what you can do; they know your abilities...they say,'We expect much more from you.' And they help and encourage you." At Murphy, one student reported getting a C grade from a science teacher for the same quality work for which he had previously received an A. The student did not complain: "She realized how much better I could do if I applied myself."

A Central Catholic parent reported a similar incident with his son, who was a good athlete. A teacher refused to turn a borderline grade into a pass even though the failure prevented the student from participating in sports the rest of that year. Though the parent complained at the time, the teacher would not be dissuaded, claiming that Raymond had been "getting by" for too long. At the time of our interview, a year later, Raymond was an honors student.

Teachers cared that their students learned and believed they could learn. "For the first time I think these kids are on a level of their own, they can compete among themselves and I think the goal we are asking for is attainable all of a sudden."

Many of the students we interviewed needed that extra dose of attention and belief. In their heterogeneously grouped grade school classrooms they had apparently been

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easy to overlook. When many students grasp the material, it is natural for teachers to move on to the next concept or unit--leaving behind those who are still baffled. But when an entire class is still floundering, teachers are much more apt to repeat the lesson, attempting to find alternate ways of facilitating student understanding.

Perhaps the reason why lower track classes in public schools appear to be so different from the ones we observed in Catholic schools is that in public schools low achieving but school-oriented students tend to be grouped with school-alienated students. This suggests that it is not the tracking system in and of itself which lowers instructional quality, but the types of groupings which lower the quality. Until now, those factors have been confounded in criticisms of lower track classes.

This means that the seemingly similar track structures in Catholic and public schools had quite different effects on students because the different "meaning systems" they conveyed affected the student-teacher relationships which occurred within them (Cohen 1969). In many comprehensive public schools, the lower track is regarded as a dumping ground for society's losers. In these Catholic schools, teachers believed in their students' desire to learn, to be academically successful. Students knew their teachers were committed to helping even the slowest among them, and that they did not equate rank-in-class with moral worth. This

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shared meaning system created trusting social relations which facilitated classroom learning (McDermott 1977). Though the philosophy and selection mechanisms of Catholic schools might facilitate this meaning system, there is no reason to believe it is restricted to any one system of schooling.

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NOTES

1) I would like to thank members of the original research team (Patricia Bauch, Irene Blum, Nancy Taylor, Tom Small, and Helen Wallace) for their contributions to this paper, and Laurence Ogle and Delores Westerman for assisting in the analysis of interview data.

2) Five schools were selected for site-visits. Only the three for which I was part of the research team are analyzed in this paper. The tracking systems at the two excluded schools were quite different from these three. One was a non-tracked college preparatory school which did not offer courses in basic skills. It lost "approximately one-half of its entering class by junior year," those students who did not achieve a C average or above (Bauch et al., 1985b: 8). The curriculum at the other school was explicitly divided into three areas, academic, business, and general, with the majority of students being in the lowest (general) track. This school, currently under study by other members of the research team, seems to reflect some of the more negative aspects of tracking found in the literature. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

3) This supports a finding of the High School and Beyond Study.

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Table 1: School Demographic Features

	Central Catholic	St. Catherine	Murphy
Size	1,000	780	300
Student/ Faculty Ratio	22/1	18/1	15/1
Tuition	$1,200	$1,200	$1,500
Non-Catholic	16%	21%	40%
Race	White: 63% Black: 34% Oriental: 3%	Hispanic: 55% Black: 35% White: 10%	Black: 94% White: 5% Hispanic: 1%
% College Bound	58%	79%	90%

Table 2: Course Credit Requirements

	National* Average	Central Catholic	St. Catherine	Murphy
English	3.5	4	4	4
Social Studies	2	3	3	3
Math	1.3	2	2	2
Science	1.2	2	2	2
Religion		4	4	2
Health/ Phys. Ed.	1.4	1	½	1½
Business		1		
Foreign Language/ Reading		1		
Electives	8	4	2½	5½
Total	17.4	22	18**	20

* from Boyer

** increased to 20 the following year

Table 3: Extent of Tracking

	National Sample	Central Catholic	St. Catherine	Murphy
All Courses	33 - 100%	100%	47%	17%
Academic Courses		100%	97%	50%

Table 4: Pervasiveness of Tracking

Number of Subjects Tracked	National Sample	Central Catholic	St. Catherine	Murphy
4	1			X
5	4		X	
6	4			
7	1	X		
8	3			

Table 5: Flexibility of Tracking

	National Sample	Central Catholic	St. Catherine	Murphy
Across Subjects	4	X		
Subject by Subject	7		X	X

Table 6: Mobility of Students Among Track Levels

	National Sample	Central Catholic	St. Catherine	Murphy
Less than 10%	2			
10% - 20%	1			
21% - 30%	3	X		
No Information	7		X	X

Table 7: Indices of School Work

	Central Catholic		St. Catherine		Murphy	
	General	Academic	General	Academic	General	Academic
School forces me to work hard	69%	79%	100%	79%	70%	83%
I work as hard as I can	39%	58%	100%	74%	60%	65%
N =	13	24	8	38	20	17

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Table 8: Focus of Control for Placement Decision

	National Sample	Central Catholic	St. Catherine	Murphy
School Personnel	10	X		X
School Personnel/ Clients	3		X	

Table 9: Percentage of Courses Taught at Different Levels of Difficulty

Central Catholic	St. Catherine*	Murphy
44%	13%	11%

*% artificially low since some Level 2 courses (Standard) have ability grouped sections within them.

Table 10: Proportion of Courses at Different Track Levels (from high to low)

Level	Central Catholic	St. Catherine	Murphy
5	2% Advanced Placement	6% College Level	
4	25% Track I	10% Honors	21% Advanced
3	32% Track II	11% Regents	
2	26% Track III	59% Standard	75% General
1	14% Track IV	14%* Basic Skill	4% Basic Skill

*% artifically inflated: all music classes labeled level 1.
If music is removed only 9 % of St. Catherine's courses are basic level.

Table 11: Time Spent on Homework

	Central Catholic		St. Catherine		Murphy	
	General	Academic	General	Academic	General	Academic
3 - 5 hours	31%	21%	13%	18%	25%	12%
5 hours or more	23%	46%	13%	53%	35%	53%
N =	13	24	8	38	20	17

Table 12: Indices of Instructional Quality

	Central Catholic		St. Catherine		Murphy	
	General	Academic	General	Academic	General	Academic
Class Discussions are Interesting	100%	92%	88%	95%	80%	82%
Lectures are Interesting	77%	42%	50%	61%	25%	41%
Teachers Help Students Understand	92%	96%	88%	100%	95%	88%
Curriculum Quailty is a Problem	28%	8%	25%	10%	50%	35%
Teaching Quality is a Problem	8%	33%	25%	18%	45%	29%
N =	13	24	8	38	20	17

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Table 13: Measures of School Efficacy and Climate

	Central Catholic		St. Catherine		Murphy	
	General	Academic	General	Academic	General	Academic
This School ...						
makes me believe I can learn	100%	100%	100%	97%	90%	94%
makes me want to learn	92%	79%	100%	97%	90%	88%
gives me skill to earn a good living	92%	92%	100%	97%	90%	94%
gives average students enough attention	86%	71%	100%	79%	65%	53%
has a family enviornment	85%	92%	100%	100%	85%	94%
N =	13	24	8	38	20	17

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Table 14: Low Income and Minority Composition of Central Catholic by Track

Track	Low Income				Minority			
	Fr.	So.	Ju.	Se.	Fr.	So.	Ju.	Se.
1	9%	9%	24%	5%	24%	13%	10%	5%
2	5%	9%	2%	11%	16%	23%	22%	21%
3	11%	13%	16%	17%	55%	40%	32%	35%
4	14%	24%	20%		52%	48%	40%	

N = 1006

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